

Officers Mess

THE MORE WE ARE TOGETHER

Community Centres

By

Major Richard Bennett, R.A.

22 MAR 1945

CURRENT AFFAIRS

*Issued fortnightly
by*

THE ARMY BUREAU
OF CURRENT AFFAIRS

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DISCUSSION WITHOUT TEARS

This bulletin is arranged in discussible form. It sets out to give you the beginning of the answers to six questions. They are :—

1. What is a Community Centre ? (pages 3-4)
2. What is it for ? (pages 4-7)
3. What can it do ? (pages 7-12)
4. What have they done in the past ? (pages 12-13)
5. What are the problems for the future ? (pages 14-15)
6. Where do we come in ? (pages 15-16)

The cross heads running through the article add up to a very brief synopsis of the whole. These and the simple illustrations will give you an easily and quickly appreciated picture of the subject in general outline before you begin the preparation of your ABCA session.

In detail, the "Discussion Points" incorporated in each of the six sections of the article present a selection of some, but not all, of the questions that might be raised by the discussion leader, and answered by the members of the group.

An attempt to run through the whole matter of the bulletin in one period would be likely to produce a patchy and unsatisfactory result. Selection will, therefore, be necessary. Any two, or at the most three, of the six sections will provide as much meat as can conveniently be digested in an hour.

ABCA is not a drill. There are several possible variations. Here are some of them :—

The first two sections of the article, for example, would give one three-point discussion.

1. What is a Community Centre ?
2. What purpose would it serve ?
3. Do we want it ?

Another method would be to use the period to design the rough outline of a Community Centre. This discussion would also fall into two sections, covered by the second and third sections of the article and the diagrams :—

1. What do we want from a Community Centre ?
2. How would we design one to fulfil our aspirations ?

Or, again, A.T.S. groups could consider what the special needs of women are and how a Community Centre could satisfy them. Another group might prefer to consider the problem of starting a Centre, and discuss the question of how it could be most effectively run.

And so on. The bill of fare thus offers a wide range of choices. It's up to you to pick what you want.

The more we are Together

Community Centres

by Major Richard Bennett, R.A.



1. DEFINITION—What They Are

THE Government has decided that Local Education authorities are to have the power to set up Community Centres. This is a decision that can pleasantly affect the lives of many, if not most, of us, though not everyone is socially inclined. It is well worth discussion as it is one that we will be able to do something about in peacetime if we are interested enough in what goes on in the boroughs in which we live.

They May Be Elementary Meeting Places

What is a Community Centre? It is a place where the people of a neighbourhood come together either to pursue some common object such as, for example, bowls, darts, a course of lectures or a music circle, or merely to meet one another, have a cup of tea in a canteen, talk, read or listen to the wireless, as in a club. In its most elementary form it exists in a small church hall which in some areas is used at various times by the Women's Institute, the Workers Education Association, the Scouts and Guides, and houses such diverse activities as the amateur dramatic society's rendering of "The Passing of the Third Floor Back," a dance organised by the local football club or a lantern slide lecture on the work of missions in Central Africa with a collection at the end.

DISCUSSION POINTS

What is a Community Centre?
Have any members of your group ever used one? Do they know it under some other name such as Miners' Welfare Centre, Social Centre, District and Village Hall? Have they used any of the Centres organised for the Forces? Do we want something like this in peacetime?

Or Ambitious and Elaborate

More ambitiously it could be—and has been already—a block of buildings where anybody who had an interest in anything other than in working, sleeping and eating—and who hasn't?—could find both other people with the same interest and the facilities for engaging in it, and also meet neighbours as friends instead of possibly living three streets away and never so much as giving them "Good morning."

Or Anything Between

Between these two there is a wide range. In peacetime community centres of every kind have been established by a number of organisations,* and improvised by the tenants of housing estates. In wartime there have been the familiar centres organised by churches, voluntary bodies and the Army itself, where thousands of soldiers on short pass have been glad of somewhere to have a meal, read and write letters in quiet and comfort, play games, or listen to the news. They vary. Some are very simple, others much more ambitious and elaborate, as the members of most groups will know.

So there is no hard and fast definition of exactly what a community centre is. It is an idea which can be, and has been, expressed in a number of different ways. Broadly you could say that a centre will tend to be what the interest and resource of the community using it cares to make it.

2. PURPOSE—What They're For

What is the purpose of a Community Centre? Most soldiers, who have had free time in a strange area, will know one of the answers. They can help us to enjoy leisure. It is often one thing to have time on our hands and another to know what to do with it. This is common military wartime experience, but it applies equally to civilian life in peacetime. Industrial development in this country has led to increased mechanisation and to shorter hours. This process is likely to continue. The trend is in that direction.

For Those With Time On Their Hands

Now the movement towards greater leisure has already raised the problem of what are we going to do with our leisure. Many people feel no difficulty here. They have their gardens, their hobbies and outside interests. But there are others who lead lives unnecessarily contained within such limits as working, eating, sleeping, football pools, the public house, the fried fish shop and the cinema, either through inertia or through lack of anything that seems an attractive alternative. It is not priggish to suggest that life has something fuller to offer, or fanciful to imagine that a well run community centre

* Such as the National Council of Social Service, the Development Commission, the British Association of Residential Settlements, Y.W.C.A., Carnegie United Kingdom Trust, and the Miners' Welfare Commission.

could make some contribution, by providing outside interests and companionship to people who lack them and facilities for greater enjoyment to those who have them.

For People Who Find a Crowd No Company

But that is not the whole story. Most people will remember the feeling of bewilderment and isolation that oppressed them in their first hours and days in the forces. They had been catapulted out of their normal surroundings and ways of life into something new and strange. Had they not been more or less absorbed by the comradeship and shared experience of people like themselves life would not have been tolerable. This gives us another way of looking at the possible usefulness of a Community Centre. You don't have to be a recruit to know what it is to feel the depression of loneliness and isolation. Many people suffer it in the normal course of their lives and have no sense of communal living to offset it.

Old people are an obvious example. Then there are thousands of housewives who lead drab, confined lives in normal times. Many of them, incidentally, have broken out of this closed circle in wartime and won't want to go back to it as it was. Even young people can find themselves frustrated and out of tune with their surroundings in towns and cities which grew up purely as work places.

For Exiles Far From Home

These are all separate social problems, but there is another larger one which includes people of all sexes and ages. It can be called the problem of migration. Joining the Army isn't the only way of leaving home and the life you knew. Masses of workers in the past 30 years have flowed from all over the country to centres of industry in search of work. At the same time there have been large movements of population from the centres of the cities towards suburbs and new housing estates in search of better living conditions. All these people have been uprooted from their normal surroundings. This is another trend that is likely to continue. We do not grow up, live, work and die in one locality to the extent that our fathers and grandfathers did.

We thus miss the social life and activities which develop in almost any long-established community.



And All That It Has Meant

There is, for example, a matiness and a spirit of co-operation in a slum which you don't find in a new housing estate where transplanted Scots, Welsh, Londoners and Lancastrians all may be living in the same street with their families. They miss the friendliness of their old homes and the familiarity of well-known surroundings. It takes more than a collection of new houses to make a neighbourhood which will be anything more than a geographical expression. A Community Centre can certainly help to make a socially conscious community out of such raw material by providing a focus for leisure, recreation, and education. They have already done so in areas like these before and during the war.

For The Unfortunate With Nowhere to Go

Most servicemen and women can appreciate yet another use for the existence of community centres. They have gone to Service centres



in the areas in which they have been stationed often for no other reason than that there was nowhere else to go. This, also, is by no means, a purely military experience. There are still plenty of places in this country where there is nowhere to go

and nothing to do after working hours. A large number of the centres, already established, were founded to meet precisely this problem. They have attempted to better bad and unhealthy social conditions.

Much has been done, but would anyone say that the job has been finished? In the words of one of the witnesses quoted in the Ministry of Education Report* on which this bulletin is based. "The great need . . . is for ample and congenial premises where men and women, especially of the lower income groups, can afford to spend their leisure, create their own social life, and develop their own potentialities. These potentialities already exist widely, but at present they are largely undeveloped because there is a dearth of meeting places which are, *in practice*, equally available to all."

For a Long Pull, A Strong Pull . . .

Common experience in the Army will suggest yet another use for Community Centres. They can be a good way of getting things done. The happiness of a military unit depends largely on the cohesion of the group spirit within it, and the extent to which it can express itself in ways that make the life of the group more pleasant or more tolerable. Every kind of well meaning scheme can be laid on or organised from

* "Community Centres" (p. 5), H.M.S.O., Price 9d.

above, but the well being of the group develops from the efforts it makes on its own behalf and the things it organises for itself, sometimes with and sometimes without outside help, such as the various educational schemes, sports and entertainment. Administratively, sports, welfare, entertainment, messing and other committees can initiate and sustain a vigorous self-contained community life.

The liveliest units are those in which this communal spirit is most active, and the dullest are those where there is nothing to do with free time but clean your boots, darn your socks, and lie on a palliasse until you are told to do something else. In civil life the same kind of democratic initiative that we find in the Army has tackled the job of turning social deserts into friendly places in which to live.

And For Education For Democracy ?

There you have four purposes which Community Centres can serve. Perhaps your group can think of others. Do they think it's worth making the attempt to get them going ? Since war broke out hundreds of thousands of men and women have been drawn into community life either in the services, the civil defence forces or war workers' hostels. They have

learned to work together and live together. Need this experience be dissipated after the war ? Couldn't it, for example, be canalised into developing the neighbourhoods in which we live into real communities, which could learn to organise things for themselves, instead of sitting back passively waiting for things to be done ? "If," says the Ministry of Education, "by grouping its leisure activities

round a recreative and educational centre, a neighbourhood can develop into a socially conscious community, learning, through managing the affairs of the centre, to participate intelligently in the work of local and national government, then education for democracy will have made a real advance."* Do you agree ?

DISCUSSION POINTS

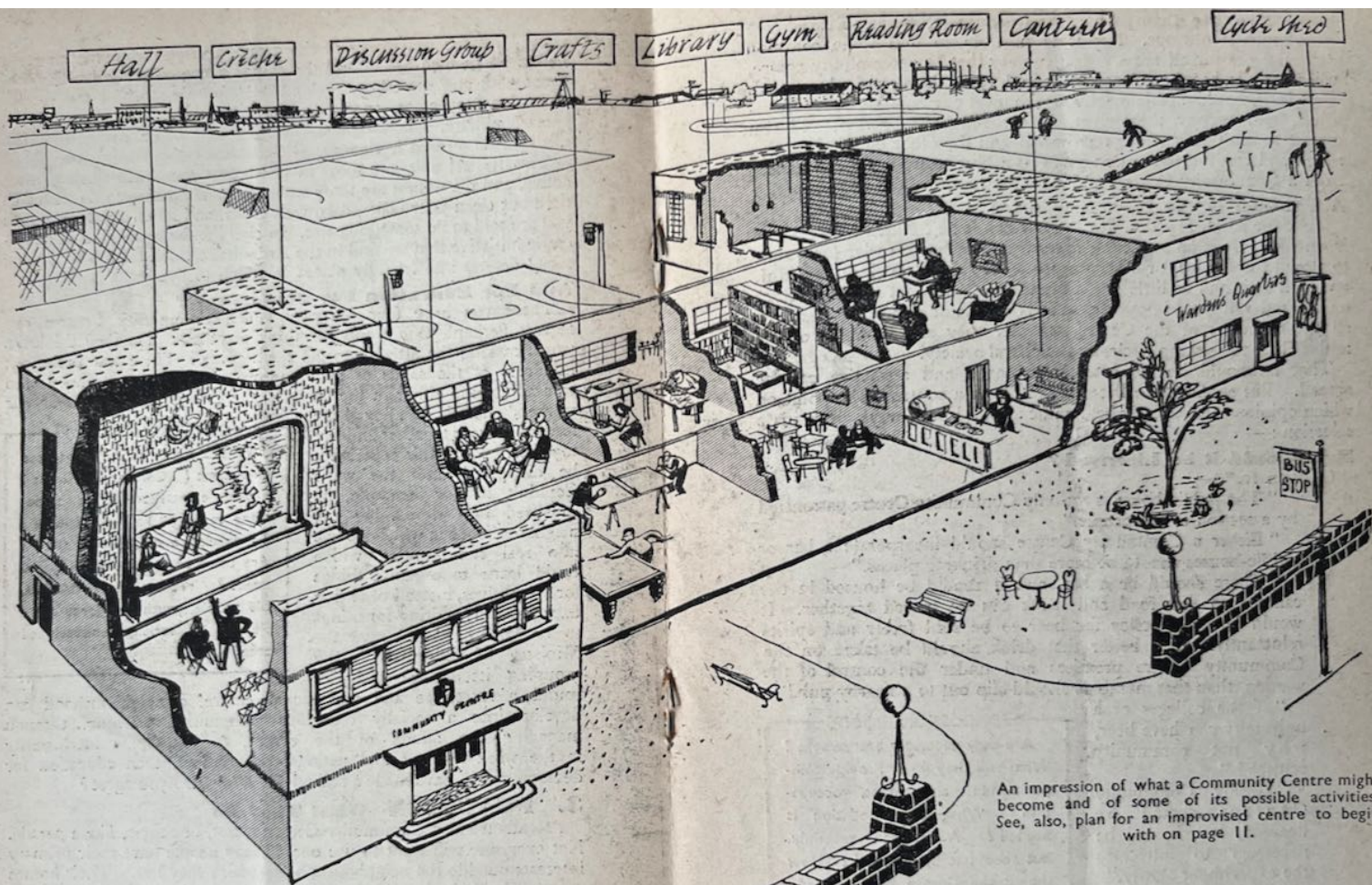
What are they for ? To increase enjoyment ? Combat loneliness ? Provide somewhere to go, something to do ? To make friends ? To develop a neighbourly spirit ? Are there any people with special needs ? Women with children, old people, youth at a loose end ? People in socially undeveloped areas ?

3. FUNCTION—What They Do

Attendance at a Community Centre is not, of course, like a parade. Not everyone will want to use one. Many people have their primary interests outside the neighbourhood in which they live. Their homes are merely their dormitories. But families are necessarily anchored to their surroundings. The intention is that there should be a centre for them to use if they want to. Its purpose is to supplement not compete with the amenities already offered by commercial enterprise or voluntary organisations.

The church and the public-house, for example, are traditional

* "Community Centres" (p. 4), H.M.S.O.



An impression of what a Community Centre might become and of some of its possible activities. See, also, plan for an improvised centre to begin with on page 11.

focuses of English social life, and will continue to be so to some extent. Cinemas, theatres, concert halls, dance halls, billiard saloons, clubs and societies will always draw their devotees. But none of them by themselves can fulfil the integrating function of the Community Centre. Most of them are relatively expensive. None are evenly distributed over the country. Some areas can already offer an attractive range

of social activities, others, particularly poor and backward districts and new housing estates, have very little to show. The needs for which a Community Centre has to cater will, therefore, vary with the community it serves. Thus a village clearly has different requirements from those of a town or suburb, with its own shopping and entertainments centre.

They Provide Company, Amusement, Occupation

So much is obvious. But it is possible to find some common denominators for all areas. You can say that any community centre, wherever it is, has three functions, social, recreational, and educational. That is, it should enable neighbours to meet one another, enjoy themselves, and occupy themselves. These functions overlap, and you cannot so easily say where one begins and the other ends. But this rough and ready classification gives us a clue to what we can expect from a Community Centre, and what we need to fulfil its purpose.

A Canteen is the First Essential

Take the social function first. How can it be fulfilled? A canteen is essential. It is an attraction in itself and makes it easier for people to attend the Centre for other purposes. It should be clean, cheerful, and well run, and as little like a branch station buffet at nine o'clock on a Sunday night as possible, as it is the natural meeting place for all the members of the Centre, whether they are members of the rabbit club, the sewing circle, or the choral society.

That it should be competently managed and attractive can be agreed. But should it be licensed? This is a controversial point on which opinions are strongly held and expressed both ways. Here is a selection:—

But Should it be Licensed?

Opinion for* :—

“The public-house is the only Community Centre patronised by a section of the people.”

“Either a Community Centre should incorporate a bar or public-houses should be more than drinking places.”

“There should be a bar, and it should be housed in the canteen so that food and drink can be served together. It would be good policy for beer to be sold freely and spirits reluctantly. It is better that drink should be taken on the Community Centre premises and under the control of the warden, than that members should slip out to a nearby pub.”

“If the colleges of a university can have beer, why not community centres?”

“Ideally Community Centres should be licensed, but it will be necessary to introduce the experiment slowly.”

“The refreshment side of a village hall is very important, and I should see no objection to a bar there.”

DISCUSSION POINTS

Are they necessary everywhere?
What will they do? Provide companionship, amusement, occupation? What accommodation is needed? A canteen certainly. But should it be licensed? How should the Centre be furnished? What else? Is separate provision necessary for men and women, young people and older people, children and babies?

* “Community Centres.” (H.M.S.O., p. 14.)

Opinion against* :—

"A bar on the premises would tempt people to drink more and would attract a number who would come in merely for a drink."

"The provision of alcoholic drinks might let down the tone of the place."

"There are sufficient facilities elsewhere in the neighbourhood. Too many people would come in merely to drink. A bar would detract from the tone of the Centre."

"It is not necessary to have a bar in a Centre. Many people would object to it."

Your group can think of other arguments itself.

A Hall and Other Rooms are Needed

The social side of the Centre will also require a main hall, with a stage for dramatic performances, dances, whist drives, socials, lectures, and perhaps a smaller hall either for these activities on a smaller scale, or for committee and club meetings and classes. There should be a

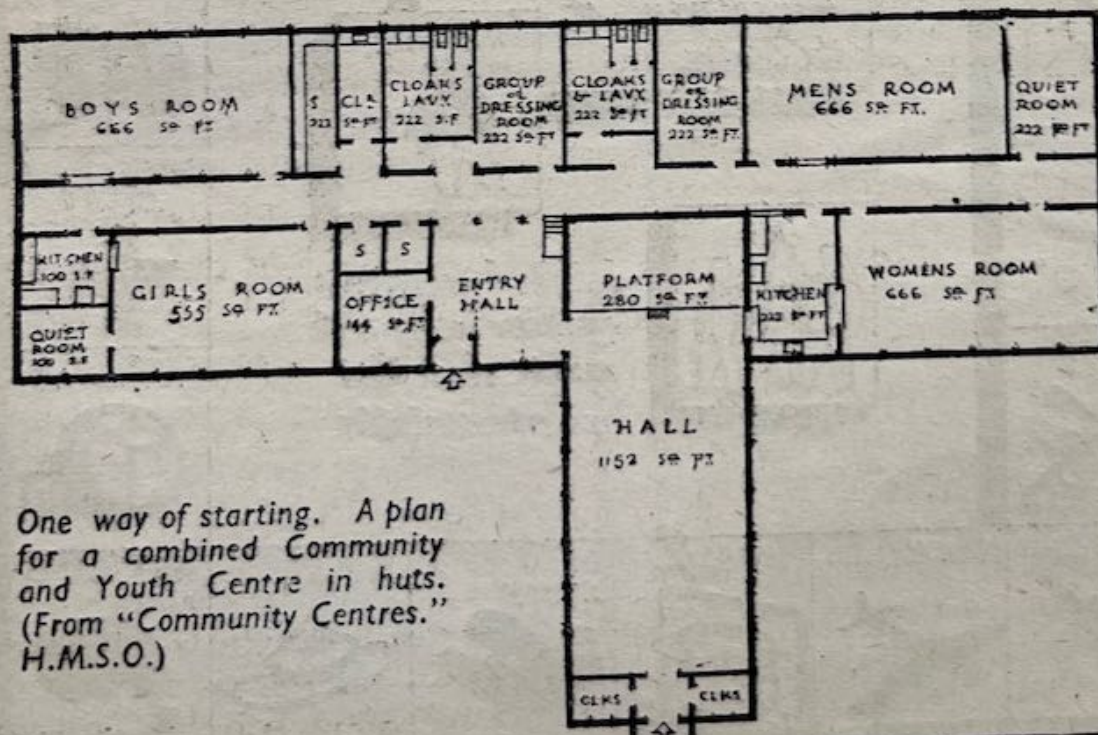
STANDARD HUTTING
18'-6" WIDE BAYS 6'-0"
EXCEPT HALL WHICH IS 24'-0"



SIDE ELEVATION



FRONT ELEVATION



One way of starting. A plan for a combined Community and Youth Centre in huts. (From "Community Centres." H.M.S.O.)

* "Community Centres." (H.M.S.O., p. 14-)

common room, and somewhere to read and write, or just sit and think.

Next, recreation. Demands here can be met by the main hall, and by the provision of games rooms for billiards, table tennis, and darts.

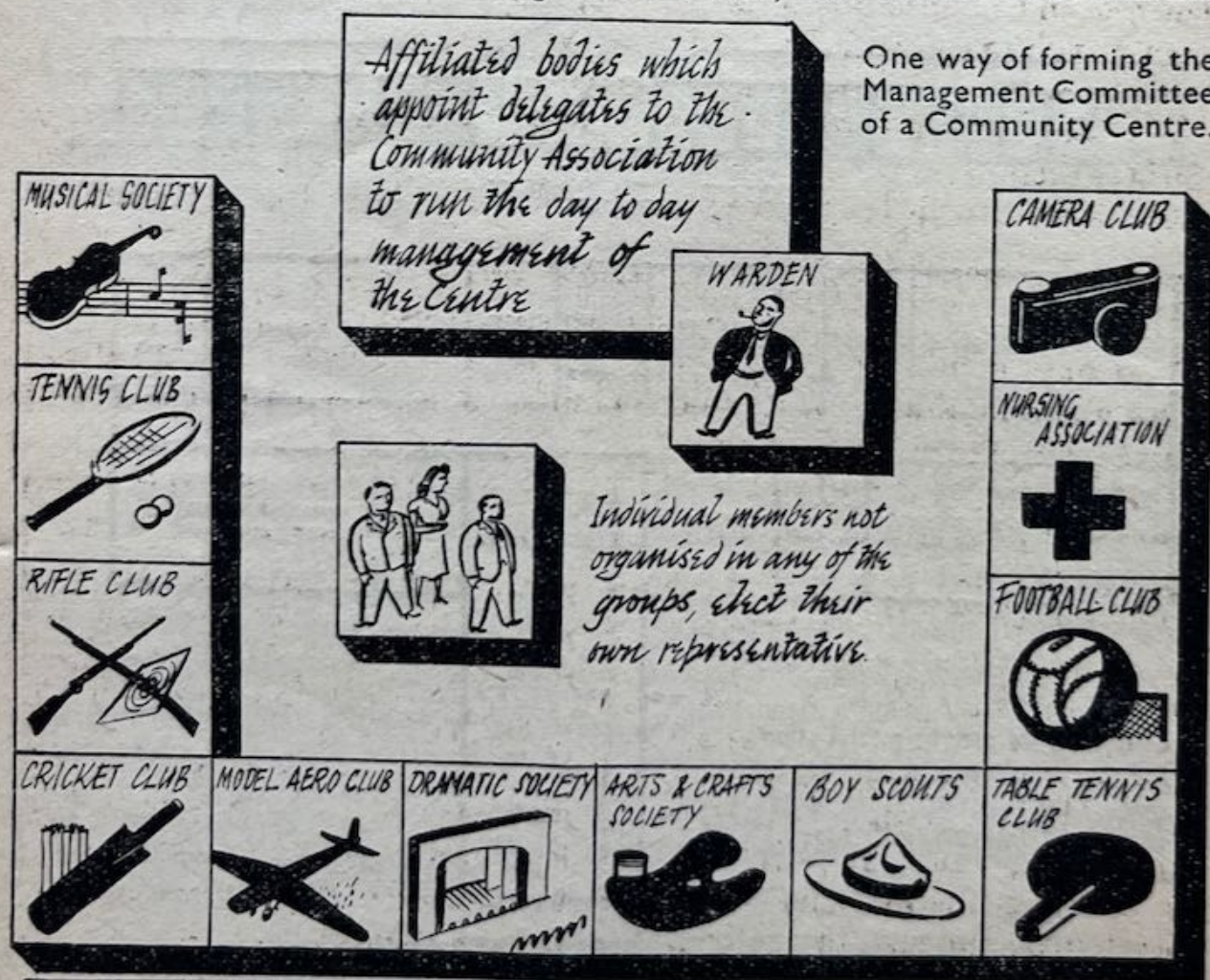
Education will also have the use of the halls, and the committee rooms, but it will certainly need its own accommodation as well, such as rooms for dressmaking classes, or for handicrafts or music circles.

4. PRACTICE—How They've Worked

These are the sort of considerations to have in mind when thinking of how a Community Centre should be planned. The way that they have been translated into practice in the past has varied enormously. Here, for example, is a description of the largest pre-war community with a membership of 9,000 and a permanent staff of over 30. It contains both a Senior Centre and a Youth Centre in the same block of buildings.

Adults Have Their Interests

*“ In the Senior Section of the Centre Club, the social activities include billiards, bridge, darts, folk dancing, modern ballroom dancing, Young Women's Afternoon Club. The recreational activities include association football, badminton, boxing, cricket, cycling, fencing, roller skating, ice hockey, Keep Fit classes for various age groups, motor cycling and light car club, netball, swimming, table tennis, and tennis. Educational



* From "Community Centres." A survey by Flora and Gordon Stephenson.

or cultural activities include a film society, the Centre magazine, orchestra, photographic society, radio entertainments, Theatre Goers' club, and Workers' Educational Association classes. Miscellaneous activities include a Sick Benefit club, and the Thrift and Holiday club.

Girls and Boys Have Others

"In the Girls' Club the activities include dressmaking, shorthand, cooking, badminton, Keep Fit, drama, socials, joint entertainment committees, handicrafts, singing, indoor games, folk dancing, metal work, library, club service. The chief organisations are the Play Centre, the Brownie Pack, the Girl Guides, and the School Girls' Club.

"The Boys' Club does woodwork, metal-work, colour-work, physical training, bookkeeping, languages, discussion groups, folk and ballroom dancing, drama, orchestra, hobbies, boxing, wrestling, running, swimming, skating, badminton, football, table tennis, and weekly club service. The chief boys' organisations are the Boy Scouts and Cubs, St. John Ambulance Cadets, Boys' Brigade, Schoolboys' Club, Old Boys' Club, and Air Training Corps of 250 boys under 18 years of age."

At the other end of the scale, the Community Centre has consisted of an all-purpose hall, about the size of the N.A.A.F.I. in a static unit, which serves as canteen, games room, reading room, and place for dancing and entertainment all in one, and is run by a warden and a team of voluntary workers.

What is the best size? If the Centre is very large it can offer a wider range of amenities, but may tend to swamp the neighbourly spirit which it hopes to foster. If it is very small and cramped and stays so, it never succeeds in being either attractive or popular.

The Size Will Depend on the Community

The National Council of Social Service, which has many years of experience with community centres, recommended one centre to every 2,000 families, but it is not possible to lay down a precise ruling which will cover all districts, or even in heavily-built up districts to determine where a community can be said to begin and end, without a careful survey. In general the Centre should be as near as possible the civic focus to which people flow in the normal course of events, either to shop or amuse themselves, and its size will therefore probably tend to be dictated by the size of the community it serves.

DISCUSSION POINTS

How have they worked in the past? Draw in the experience of your group. Could they be better? How big should they be? What should they offer? Minimum and ideal requirements? How is membership to be formed? By individual or family membership? By affiliation of clubs and societies? By both methods?

5. FUTURE—What's To Do?

Starting one will not be easy. It has been estimated that a neighbourhood population of from 5,000-10,000 will need the following accommodation.

A large hall, with stage and dressing-rooms, a gymnasium, a small all-purpose hall, a large common room, kitchen, two large craft rooms with stores, games room, three quiet rooms, a library and reading room, accommodation for the warden, entrance hall, lavatories, cloakroom, passages, heating chambers, stores, cycle accommodation.*

Siting and Building One Will be Difficult

Where are you to put all this? This is a problem that is going to face Local Education authorities in all areas except in those in which new housing is going up and the Community Centre can be allowed for from the beginning. There are few buildings already standing which could be easily or suitably adapted to this new purpose. New building will not be able to take priority over the provision of new schools, and the repair and construction of houses in which to live.

One suggestion for the solution of this problem is to link the Community Centre with some other purpose and make one set of buildings serve two ends, at least partially. Combining a Community Centre and a youth centre would be one way of doing this, but however desirable, is not the whole answer, as there are almost as many areas without youth centres as without Community Centres.

It Could Be Combined With a School

Sharing accommodation with schools is another possibility, which has already been tried in the past—with notable success in the Village Colleges in Cambridgeshire.

One objection to this is that adults tend to resent going back to school. On the other hand it is felt that this objection would lose most of its weight if the adults could be given their own canteen, serving attractive light refreshments, their own attractive and well furnished social and reading rooms, and were not required to squeeze themselves into desks several times too small, for lectures and discussions.

"There is also," says the Ministry of Education's pamphlet, "much to be said for linking up school youth work and Community Centre activities, particularly on a new housing estate, where the welding of communities is always an urgent need. A youth wing could in effect be the old scholars' club as the great majority of the children of the locality would pass through the school,

DISCUSSION POINTS

What are the difficulties about building? How shall we meet them? Where shall we put the Centre? How is the problem going to differ from place to place? Can a Community Centre be combined with a Youth Centre, or with a school? Could we improvise to begin with?

* From "Community Centres." (H.M.S.O., p. 23).

and the Community Centre's members would include the parents of the pupils. The linking up of the school with the general life of the community offers many attractions." What do you think?

But the Building is Not the Only Problem

This will probably be the solution in many areas. In others where a suitable site can be acquired temporary hatted Centres on the lines of the diagram of page 11 may be set up before anything as ambitious as the artist's impression on pages 8-9.

How is the organisation to be started and run? Is it enough to provide the necessary building, install a warden and other necessary staff, advertise the attractions and wait for the neighbours to roll in? Past experience suggests that it is not. One of the liveliest and most interesting of existing Centres was started and run by a group of tenants on a housing estate who thought something ought to be done. They started with nothing.

The Neighbours Must Also Be Interested

As a contrast there is a Community Centre built by a local authority on a municipal estate. Here is a report on it after the first two years of its existence.

"The Social Centre is located in the newest section of the estate and was intended to help in building up a sound community spirit amongst the residents. Great things were expected of it from the very first. The mere presence of a community building was expected to accomplish miracles in the way of reform. It was not generally realised that a community life would take some time to evolve, even where a fine building already existed. There was no preparatory work done on the estate before the Centre was built except that a Community Association was formed 'from above.' Some of the members of this Association had no vital interest in the estate, and the organisation has never flourished."*

6. INITIATIVE—Where You Come In

There is an obvious danger in laying things on from above. Hitherto the normal drill has been for the Community Centre to be run by a democratically elected Community Association with a holding committee under a trust deed to take ultimate financial responsibility.

There Are Several Ways of Running a Centre

In some Centres the membership has been elected at an annual general meeting, and in others has consisted of delegates appointed from the various clubs and societies affiliated to the Centre, one delegate for each group irrespective of size. At others, and this in practice has been found to work best by the National Council of

* From "Community Centres" (Flora and Gordon Stephenson.)

Social Service, these two methods of selection have been combined, and the community association is partially elected and partially appointed, as in the diagram on page 12.

Authority Might Stifle Enterprise

But however the community association is chosen, most authorities insist that there must be active participation one way or another by the neighbours using the community if it is to be a success and fulfil its purpose. There is a school of thought that maintains that official organisation would strangle active individual interest. As one of the witnesses heard by the Ministry of Education said: "It might be possible to run a highly efficient Community Centre from a local education authority's office, but it would not be of the same value to the community as a Centre run democratically."*

But is control by Local Education Authorities necessarily incompatible with democratic day-to-day management of the Centre? It wouldn't seem so. Here, for example, is how the Cambridgeshire Village Colleges are run:—

"A governing body has been appointed for each village college, on which students and parents appoint members. The warden himself is a member and the Cambridge University Board of Extra-mural Studies is also represented. The students have a further voice in the running of the college through a students' council. The local education authority think it essential for the Community Centre to have a separate and effective governing body, although they reserve to themselves the final word in finance and administration. At the village colleges, the governing body appoint all the staff except the warden, who is appointed by the local education authority. The chairman of the governing body attends the meetings of the local education authority at which the warden is appointed."*

DISCUSSION POINTS

Where do we come in? Can the Centre really provide for the needs of the neighbourhood if the neighbours don't participate in its work? How can they do it? Through a community association? How would you elect it? What sort of man do we want for a warden? Or do we leave all these questions to the Local Education Authority?

But That is Up to Us

At all events, this is a question to end with which can only be answered in time by local education authorities and you and me and all the rest of us.



* "Community Centres" (H.M.S.O., pp. 21 and 22).